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ABSTRACT

Once the black student is introduced to the charisma of all literature through a reading of his own great writers, with whom he can identify, he can also be fired with motivation for the entire realm of literature. If black literature and the new black art are brought into the classroom, the fears and prejudices between blacks and whites will lessen and trust between them will grow. There is much joy to be found in the beauty and strength now unfolding in the black consciousness, in the developing artistic genius, and in the as yet unrealized vast potential of mind and spirit. If the youth is to be educated, so must the adult be. This implies an openness on the part of the teacher if we are to conquer the gap in communication by a never ending search for the experience of humanity conveyed in the art form. Through the medium of literature, the teacher penetrates and breaks rigidity and darkness within the student, nourishing instead enlightenment, inspiration, and hope. This is possible only through the teacher's own humanity, demonstrated by an awareness of life, an attitude of philosophic doubt in the search for truth, and a grasp of the beauty of spirit within his students. (LL)

# Our Race Is Humanity

(from "Esperanto" by
Melvin B. Tolson)







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One of my students recently asked, "Why are you, a white teacher, so interested in teaching black literature? I address myself to this question now, alluding, however, to the problems and rewards shared by teachers and students of all ethnic groups who are brought together in such a study.

The problem of communication differs between teaching situations. Regardless of the racial constituency of class or identity of teacher, the writing of the blacks who belong to the Anglo-American-International Tradition do not present the same difficulties in communication that one finds in the work of the new Black Art Movement. And, as the races continue to affect each other in the dramatic flux of an ever changing world, the confrontation between Western culture and the new movement is constantly becoming of greater import. The question, however, is not one to be easily settled by a simple choice of ideology: perhaps what stands most in need is more study of the problem.

Western Tradition has always upheld the concept of universality without bringing it to fruition, and the current writers of the new black consciousness have turned from this concept in utter disillusion. Universality denotes a faith in the humanity common to all men, with the hope of brotherhood as the basis for a common fulfillment of human happiness. As a student, I wrote in "A College Girl and Life" that there is an identical hunger in each man's soul, and "that hunger is God's declaration of the brotherhood of man and the equality of purpose in our creation."[1] Now in 1973, I cannot believe that universality does not exist and that brotherhood is impossible. As a doctoral student of Comparative Literature, I recognize the uniting presence of humanity in the diversity of cultures, or, as Ralph Ellison writes, "Our fate is to become one, and yet many."[2]

Melvin B. Tolson writes in the poem "Esperanto": "Our fatherland is the earth/ Our race is humanity."[3] He was acclaimed by Margaret Walker as one of "The New Poets" for demonstrating social protest early in the century,[4] yet, the miracle of Tolson is that he manages to be racial, patriotic, and universal. The last lines of "Dark Symphony" are "With the Peoples of the World/ We advance."[5]

He was the spokesman for all ethnic groups in America: the poem "Kikes, Bohunks, Crackers, Dagos, Niggers" ends with the lines "We are the underdogs / On a hot Trail!"[6] Brotherhood, therefore, implies a fraternization of cultures. Ralph Ellison said in a recent interview

> I'm not a separatist. The imagination is integrative, ... And I'm unashamedly an American integrationist.[7]

W. E. B. DuBois writes of a "catholicity of taste and culture,"[8] and this is a term which appears frequently in the work of Tolson. We know that the dictionary defines "catholic" as "universal," and I would take this to mean that all cultures express a basic humanity through the interests and nature common to man; from this we can deduce that all humanistic endeavor constitutes a treasury from which every man can draw regardless of a particular origin, or, indeed, of a particular time. Tolson was greatly influenced by T. S. Eliot, and it is certain that Tolson is a poet who possesses the historical sense which Eliot defines as the meeting of the timeless and the temporal. This great and comparatively unknown black poet was no begging conformist, nor did he allow his race to swallow his art. Lines in "The Poet" demonstrate his artistic philosophy:

> A champion of the People versus Kings--
> His only martyrdom is poetry:
> A hater of the hierarchy of things-
> Freedom's need is his necessity.[9]

Previous to the Black Art Movement, the black writer had been influenced by the great writers of all races, all countries, and all periods of literature. Dubois writes in The Souls of Black Folk:

> I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas... I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension. So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the Veil.[10]

In addition to Eliot, Tolson was influenced by Whitman, Hart Crane, Pound, the Metaphysical Poets, and the French Symbolists. And we know that Ellison acknowledges his debt to the writers Malraux, Dostoevsky, Faulkner, Eliot, and, especially, Hemingway.[11]

This introduces an essential perspective of the value of black literature in the classroom: once the black student is introduced to the charisma of all literature through a reading of his own great

writers with whom he can identify, he can also be fired with motivation for the entire realm of literature. In Richard Wright's Black Boy, we find an unforgettable passage, a dramatization of the impact of discovery which the mind of the young can discover in coming upon the great literature of Western Tradition.[12] It is not surprising, therefore, to read in "Education and Black Education" by Jon Wagner of the impetus achieved through the reading of this novel by a group of highschool dropouts who were brought together in a story workshop at the Christian Action Ministry Academy; these students were inspired to go on from Black Boy to selections from Homer, Kafka, Camus, and Orwell.[13]

One wonders if this is not the answer to the teacher who says, "Why worry about black literature if the student doesn't even know Shakespeare?" The problem is that many blacks believe that Shakespeare simply isn't relevant. It is again the challenge of communication: to reach the recipient by way of the channels which make him receptive and by filling his particular need; otherwise, the instructor, as any communicator, gets shut off. We all know that loss of the historical perspective has been destructive on the white student as on the black, but black separatism intensifies the gap, so that there is now an immediate, frightening need for the black student to understand the relevancy of humanistic learning per se.

A broadening of educational horizons can help solve what is fast becoming a desperate situation, and the introduction of the black writers whose theme is universality would weaken the dichotomy. If the student reads Cleaver, Baraka, and Giovanni after a study of The History of Black Literature, or at least after a study of the major figures, it is quite a different thing from his reading and knowing nothing but the separatist dogma of his peers. At the convention of the College Language Association last Spring, Dr. Elias Blake spoke of the damaging effect of "the single vision," emphasizing that the young black should have knowledge of "the elder statesmen" such as Arthur P. Davis, Sterling Brown, and Alain Locke, and that, indeed, there is a failing in the educational system if the student leaves it without the willingness and ability to debate.

It is ironical that Imamu Amiri Baraka has given a profound statement on the need for communication between cultures. During sixties, when he was still named LeRoi Jones, this present "theolan" of separatism wrote in Home: Social Essays,

> And the social, though it must be rooted, as are all evidences of existence, in culture, depends for its impetus for the most part on a multiplicity of influences; Other cultures for instance.... Communication is only important because it is the broadest root of education.[14]

The give and take in the classroom during the study of Black writers could only enhance the efficacy of our educational system. We must remember that this communication serves to clarify the identity and heighten the dignity of the white as well as the black student, for, as James Baldwin has written, "It is a terrible, an inexorable law that one cannot deny the humanity of another without diminishing one's own."[15] In the opening of Ellison's Invisible Man, when the young black installs himself in the basement where 1,369 filament type bulbs adorn the ceiling, he does so because he wants to know himself, and "truth is the light and light is the truth"; yet, in the Epilogue, he is forced to conclude "that the true darkness lies within my own mind." And the author reminds the reader that he speaks for a common humanity, in the very last sentence of the novel: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" It is essentially of modern man that he writes who is lost in ambivalence.

Ellison writes of another plight of universal brotherhood -- the need, despite all, for the black to love.

> I have been hurt to the point of abysmal pain, hurt to the point of invisibility. And I defend because in spite of all I find that I love. In order to get some of it down I have to love.[16]

True to the exquisite spirituality of the black people, the black writer prior to that of contemporary separatism has been a lover of the human race. We need only listen to the slave songs and spirituals to recognize that here is a level of love, of forbearance, and forgiveness which whites do not know. This love becomes the theme for three great novelists - Ellison, Baldwin, and Wright- but, now, the love is in traumatic conflict with hate. They are the spokesmen for the havoc which hate creates in the human spirit. In Notes of a Native Son, Baldwin writes, "I saw nothing very clearly but I did see this: that my life, my real life, was in danger, and not from anything other people might do but from the hatred I carried in my own heart."[17] After committing two murders in hate and fear, Wright's Bigger Thomas discovers humanity just before he is executed, rendering the last few chapters of Native Son among the most beautiful of pleas for justice and brotherhood.[18] And yet these three great writers are excluded from many a course of study in the American novel. What a farce!

Shall we call Martin Luther King, Jr. the priest of love? In the article "Integration Versus Black Nationalism," he writes, "When I speak of love, I am speaking of that force which all the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life."[19] Beautiful, beautiful Lorraine Hansberry, author of Raisin in the Sun, knew about life and love:

> Love? Ah, ask the troubadors who come from those who have loved when all reason pointed to the uselessness and foolhardiness of love. Perhaps we shall be the teachers when it is done. Out of the depths of pain we have thought to be our sole heritage in this world-- O, we know about love![20]

We recognize the great beauty of this passage as of all the passages quoted, and it is to the worth of this literature as literature that the attention of student, teacher, white, and black must be directed.

The concept of brotherhood necessitates justice and change, and, if this is to be achieved through non-violence, we must nourish the young in dignity. Early in this century, W. E. B. DuBois phrophesized of his black brothers that "to flout their striving idly is to welcome a harvest of brutish crime and shameless lethergy in our very laps."[21] This is tragically demonstrated in The Autobiography of Malcolm X, but this work is also a dramatization of the truth that hate is the other side of the coin of love. Malcolm's followers do not often speak of his rejection of separatism, racism, and hatred before his death, and yet in the Epilogue we find this testimony:

> Malcolm X, speaking of the old Mosque Number 7 days, said, "That was a bad scene, brother. The sickness and madness of those days -- I'm glad to be free of them. It's a time for martyrs now. And if I'm to be one, it will be in the cause of brotherhood. That's the only thing that can save this country. I've learned it the hard way -- but I've learned it...."[22]

To read this work is an education in itself, and it is necessary that the American student know the truth of this man, the hero of Black Nationalism, who wanted to be a martyr for the cause of brotherhood!

Let us now objectively search for the meanings of the new Black Art Movement. In 1969, Baldwin gave an address in Germany, "Racism or World Community,[23] and this title seems to depict the core of contemporary controversy. His stand is still with the concepts of humanity and love,[24] but this writer is deeply involved in the needs of his people and is therefore a realist.[25] The German essay is concluded with admonition: when any structure ignores the miseries of the world

and becomes too alienated from the intentions of its constituents, sooner or later this structure will go into decline.[26] Thus, the gentle Baldwin reveals the basis of the new revolution. In 1968 Larry Neal had written "It is the opinion of many Black writers, I among them, that the Western aesthetic has run its course; it is impossible to construct anything meaningful within its decaying structure." What is to replace Western Tradition? "The Black artist must create new forms and new values, sing new songs (or purify old ones); and along with other Black authorities, he must create a new history, new symbols, myths and legends (and purify old ones by fire)."[27]

This polarization of the new black is further emphasized by the antipathy which he feels towards any characteristic of whiteness within the black race itself. Thus we find in "The Self-Hatred of Don L. Lee,"

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outer.[28]

The ambivalence within the ranks of the blacks is also seen in the title of a poem by Nikki Giovanni, "The True Import of Present Dialogue: Black vs Negro." This poem also demonstrates the horror of racism and hate. It begins

Nigger
Can you kill
Can you kill
Can a nigger kill[29]

There is no doubt of the intention of armed revolution as expressed by Baraka and others in the sixties, but, although Baraka has said that this concept of armed revolution must be held in reserve as a final resort, the real thrust of the seventies is political, cultural, and educational, the new Black Art used as co-partner in the fight for ration, or, in the present day terminology, survival.

Last April at Howard University, Baraka said:

> First everything we do must serve the revolution or it serves the enemies. Art must be functional, collective and committed. There is no such thing as art for art's sake.[30]

In his own poem "Black Art," he writes, "We want'poems that kill'/ Assassin poems, poems that shoot guns."[31] Baraka has spoken and written much on the structure of a new black value system, calling for emphasis on "that which is African rather than European."[32] For, again in "Black Art" we find, "We want a black poem/ And a Black world/ Let the World be a Black poem."

Here we come to a complete impasse, for the thrust of this new writing is clearly understood to be for and by blacks only. In the very valuable and recent publication, Understanding the New Black Poetry, Stephen E. Henderson poses questions vital to our discussion.

> Who is a poet? Are the answers the same for all people, in all times? Is the concept of the poet relevant to an extended discussion of Black poetry?

He explains the language of the new poetry as translation of black music and speech, and he suggests that "what is meant by 'beautiful' and by 'forms' is to a significant degree dependent upon a peoples's way of life, their needs, their aspirations, their history -- in short, their culture." To the question "Who is to judge Black poetry?" he answers, "Black people obviously should judge, since the poetry -- at least the contemporary poetry -- is directed at them."[33] However, as Darwin T. Turner explains in "Afro-American Literary Critics: An Introduction," further dilemma exists in the reality that there has been a severe shortage in the past of black critics.[34]

The question "Who is to judge black literature" is tied to the question "Who is to teach black literature;" It seems to me that there is only one answer: scholarship knows no boundaries. W. Edward Farrison writes in "What American Negro Literature Exists And Who Should Teach It":"The all-important twofold question is , not whether the would-be teacher is fired with enthusiasm or can pass for a Negro or a non-Negro, but does he know the subject well enough,and is he enough of a scholarly teacher to teach it effectively?[35] Nick Aaron Ford of Morgan State College, reporting on a survey which he had made of Black Studies programs in American colleges and universities, writes that, in reply to his question concerning the feasibility of the informed white teacher assuming responsibility for black literature, the white chairmen of the English departments and 86% of the black chairmen answered yes. One of the comments from a white chairman was,

"Yes, just as a Black teacher is qualified to teach Irish literature and a Christian to teach Portnoy's Complaint."[36]

Dr. Arthur P. Davis, Professor Emeritus of Howard University, beloved and distinguished scholar of American Negro Literature, has said that the special courses in black literature were created to fill a gap caused by the omission of black writers from the anthologies and texts utilized in the classroom, and that there will come a day when these special courses will not be needed, because representative writers will be included in the texts. We know that a start is being made in this direction, although on a very slow pace, and it seems to me that the burden of responsibility is now placed on the classroom teacher. What is missing from the class text can be augmented by a treasury of available material in syllabi, bibliographies, paperbacks, and audio-visual material.

I, therefore, ask the writers and the followers of the new Black Art Movement the following: how can we who recognize and respect the sacredness of their cause, and we who love our students, not be involved in their realm of endeavor? The teacher of the classroom in the public school system is the necessary middleman. Art belongs to the one who will receive, and, as it is now, there are not many who receive.

If the youth is to be educated, so must the adult be. This implies an openness on the part of the teacher if we are to conquer the gap in communication by a never ending search for the experience of humanity conveyed in the art form. Through the medium of literature, the teacher penetrates and breaks rigidity and darkness within the student, nourishing, instead, enlightenment, inspiration, and hope. This is possible only through the teacher's own humanity, demonstrated by an awareness of life, an attitude of philosophic doubt in the search for truth, and a grasp of the beauty of spirit within his students.

In fact, there is much joy to be found in the beauty and strength now unfolding in the black consciousness, in the developing artistic genius, and in the yet unrealized vast potential of mind and spirit. This second Renaissance carries so much zeal, industry, talent, motivation, and love of black for black that we must believe the future will bring goodness. In a symposium last year at Howard, John Killens emphasized that the "love of the blacks for each other is an affirmation of deep humanity." The element of beauty is recognizable in the

concept of fraternity. One of my students, Catherine Showell, concludes a good poem with the lines

We're going to grasp with both hands the
throat of a fleeting life's dream.
We'll ride, unbridled, this boulting bitch.

Revolution is a process...
Being in becoming...
I am we
I am we...
I
AM
We!

Sometimes the beauty is tragic, as in Dudley Randall's "Ballad of Birmingham" which is based on historical fact;[37] this poem is written in traditional ballad form and ranks with the best. There is also much satire and irony in the new poetry, which many will find unpalatable and unlovely, but beauty in poetry can be ugly because truth is often ugly.

It is now for us to do our part by "Going to Meet the Man," the hu-man within each individual, black and white. The ore of black experience embodied in the written word is needed by the American, student and teacher, black and white, if he is to be truly educated and truly human. Baldwin, in a colloquial with Margaret Mead, Rap on Race, said, "The American sense of reality and work has been somehow hopelessly inhibited by the attempt to get away from something which is really theirs."[38] And to combat the principle of armed revolution, there must be an internal revolution in the national school system. The last paragraph of Franz Fanon's moving book, The Wretched of the Earth, cries: "For Europe, for ourselves, and for humanity, comrades, we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man."[39]

The willingness to change and learn is perhaps the teacher's most formidable challenge. At the CLA convention last Spring, President Ruth N. Horry, in a stunning opening address "Ethnic Studies and Humanistic Concern," said that as teachers We must become futurists," "stimulate interpersonal and intergroup communication since this is the force which will eventually humanize us all," and use human perspectives in a non-traditional manner. I have learned that one must courage to undertake much of the contemporary black poetry in

the classroom, but, then, one also has much love and this makes the difficult possible. We can do this, for, as Orde Coombs wrote in my copy of his book, Do You See My Love For You Growing? -- "We must believe that the future belongs to us."[40]

It is to be noted that there is black scholarship of great excellence which can be utilized in courses besides those of black studies: Frank Snowden's Blacks in Antiquity is an invaluable source for the Greco-Roman period in literature and history; John Lovell Jr.'s Black Song is an encyclopedic text for musical as well as literary references on the origin and nature of the Afro-American Spiritual.

But in the analysis of what we may honestly not recognize as literature, the teacher may yet be upheld by the certainty that the material does hold beauty and truth for many students, because they identify with it in spirit. And, it seems to me, that a consideration of this new literature exacts a fearful responsibility in justice. Is it not possible that any work which is an expression of thematic content on an exalted, profound, "gutsy" level, in a body of structure which is effective, strong, dramatic, beautiful, necessary, perfect for its content, speaking to people in such a way that they must grow from the experience in humanity -- is it not possible that this is art, and all our talk like the useless fluttering of the moth against the light. For there is light, even in all that usage of the four letter word, and it is perhaps by the breaking of the darkness and hatred within, the breaking of the inner dam by the waters of rhapsodic utterance, that we may all be purified.

I conclude, therefore, that if black literature, that is, writers of both Western Tradition and the new Black Art, is brought into the classroom, the fears and prejudices will lessen and trust between black and white will grow. Margaret Mead has said, "You have got to really have been loved and touched by people who look very different, if you are not going to be frightened."[41]

I still believe what I wrote in my school days here in Philadelphia in the forties:

> ...my belief in the power of love is now even more intense. Man was made to love. It is as natural to him as breathing.[42]

And, in the quietness of my being, I ask, "If I in my soul am or to the black, how can he say I am not?"

Footnotes

[1]America, 27 December 1941, pp. 316-317.

[2]Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (New York: The New American Library, 1952), p. 499.

[3]Melvin B. Tolson, Rendezvous With America (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1944), p. 31.

[4]Black Expression, Ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (New York: Webright and Talley, Inc., 1969,) p. 94.

[5]Rendezvous, p. 42.

[6]Modern Quarterly, 11, No. 14 (Fall, 1939), pp. 18-19.

[7]The Washington Post, 19 August 1973, p. G1.

[8]Three Negro Classics (New York: Avon Books, 1971), p. 272.

[9]Rendezvous, p. 29.

[10]Three Negro Classics, p. 284.

[11]"The World and the Jug," Shadow and Act (New York: New American Library, 1966), p. 145-146.

[12]Black Boy (New York: Harper and Row, 1945), p. 272.

[13]School Review, 80 (August, 1972), 591-597.

[14]"Expressive Language" Essays, Ed. Fred L. Bergmann (Dubuque: William C. Brown Co., 1970), pp. 133-137.

[15]Lorraine Hansberry, The Movement (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964), title page.

[16]Invisible Man, pp. 10, 501-503.

[17]Afro-American Literature: An Introduction, Eds. Robert Hayden, David J. Burrows, and Frederick R. Lapides (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1971), pp. 204-213.

[18]Native Son (Boston: Harper and Row, 1940), p. 388.

[19]Cavalcade, Eds. Arthur P. Davis and Saunders Redding (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co.), p. 795.

[20]Lorraine Hansberry, To Be Young, Gifted, and Black (New York: New American Library, 1969), p. 263.

[21]Three Negro Classics, p. 272.

[22]The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 429.

[23]See "Menschlichkeit und Machstrukturen" in Menschenwürde und Gerechtigkeit, Ed. Carl Ordnung (Berlin: Union Verlag, 1969), pp. 23-39; also "Weisser Rassimus oder Weltgemeinschaft" in Verspielter Friede, Ed. Klaus M. Beckman (Jugenddienst - Verlag, 1969), pp. 39-47.

[24]See new release, Blacks on Whites: A Dialogue (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1973).

[25]See Going to Meet the Man (New York: Dial Press, 1965), and Go Tell It on the Mountain (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1973).

[26]Menschenwürde und Gerechtigkeit, p. 39.

[27]Cavalcade, p. 798.

[28]Black Poets, p. 298.

[29]Black Poets, p. 318.

[30]The Evening Star and Daily News, 26 April 1973, p. C6.

[31]Stephen Henderson, Understanding The New Black Poetry (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1973), p. 213.

[32]The Hilltop (Howard University, Washington, D. C.), 55:8, 27 October 1972, p.1.

[33]Henderson, pp. 7-9.

[34]The Black Aesthetic, Ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1972), p. 57.

[35]CLA JOURNAL, 14, No. 4 (June, 1970), p. 379.

[36]CLA Journal, 16, No. 3 (March, 1973), p. 339.

[37]The Movement, pp. 90-91.

[38]Rap on Race (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1971), p. 84.

[39]Franz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1963), p. 316.

[40]Orde Coombs, Do You See My Love For You Growing? (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1972).

[41]Rap on Race, p. 131.

[42]America, p. 317.